

Uttanasana

BY ADAM BORNSTEIN

WITH WINTER HERE IN THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE, I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE ESPECIALLY MEANINGFUL TO EXPLORE AN ASANA THAT GUIDES US INWARD. WINTER SYMBOLIZES THAT ASPECT OF OUR LIVES SO NECESSARY FOR INNER BALANCE. IT IS A TIME FOR QUIET REFLECTION. THE LONG NIGHTS AND COLDER WEATHER ENCOURAGE US TO TAKE TIME FOR REGROUPING, FOR REASSESSING OUR LIVES. IT IS A TIME FOR TAKING SPACE FROM THE EXTERNAL WORLD OF DOING INTO THE CONTEMPLATIVE INNER WORLD OF BEING.



The pose, Uttanasana (pronounced Oot-tan-as-ana), is a standing forward bend pose. The Sanskrit name translates as: Ut – intense, tan – to expand or extend, asana – pose. In general, all forward bends can help us to access a place within us that is beyond restless thoughts, a place of calmness and repose.

If we look at nature we can see that winter is a time for energy conserving, in contrast to summer with its pull to be more extroverted. Look at the bear that hibernates in the winter and draws its forces within, only to emerge in the spring fully rejuvenated and filled with vibrant power. Uttanasana is similar in its effects: Our internal gaze, and our life-force retreats inside where our power condenses and builds. As you smoothly breathe in the pose, feel the breath-energy pulsate inside you. Gather your outgoing vitality that often is dispersed through our sense involvement with the world, and allow it to circulate within. As you mindfully emerge from the pose and stand upright again, can you sense a renewal, a rebirth? If I had to choose one word to describe the effect of Uttanasana it would be renewal.

MAIN BENEFITS

- Increases circulation, especially through torso and head.
- Stretches backside of body, especially hamstrings, hips, and spinal muscles.
- Excellent for relieving backaches (when practiced safely).
- Massages and tones abdominal organs improving digestion and elimination.
- Good preparation for inversions.
- Interiorises the mind, leading to an inner stillness.

CAUTIONS AND CONTRAINDICATIONS

- High blood pressure (be cautious, consult your doctor)
- Low blood pressure (be careful entering and exiting the pose)
- Spinal disc problems such as bulging, herniation, sciatica,. (consult your doctor)

GUIDELINES

For Uttanasana to be practiced safely and effectively there are some important guidelines to look at. Perhaps the most vital physical aspect of the pose is to enable the pelvis to rotate forward. This forward pelvic rotation will allow the spine to lengthen evenly from its base at the tailbone all the way to the crown of the head.

I recommend consulting a good anatomy book to get a picture of how the femur bones connect into the hip sockets forming this ball and socket joint. Get a feeling of how the pelvis and legs work together. As the backs of the legs lengthen the pelvis is free to rotate over the ball-like heads of the femur bones. The hamstring muscles at the backside of the thighs can either support or inhibit this action. If they are short and tight, attempting Uttanasana can feel like a tug-a-war. In addition, tight hip rotator muscles that attach at the sacrum and insert on the upper femur bone can also restrict the movement of the pelvis. You are attempting to fold forward at the hip joints, but the muscles are resisting your desired intention. Since the hamstrings attach to the sitting bones, if they are tight they will actually pull your pelvis in the opposite direction as you move into the pose. This can potentially cause some serious problems in your spine. You may unevenly compress the intervertebral discs. If you do



Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3

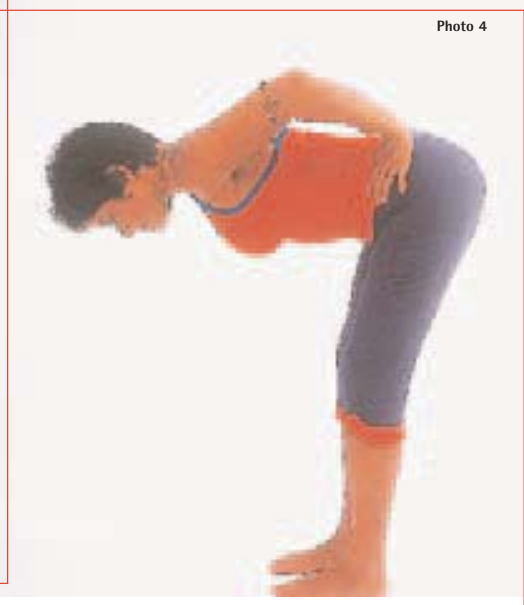


Photo 4

this repeatedly, especially from the standing position where your spine is hanging in space without support, a disc in the lumbar spine could bulge or tear.

PREPARATION

For this reason, if you are tight in the hamstrings and hip rotators, I highly recommend practising two essential poses that will effectively open up these areas. Understand that consistent practice is necessary for change to occur. It would be a good idea to set aside a special time every day for your yoga practice.

Photo #1 shows a variation of Supta Padangusthasana (reclining leg stretch pose). This is an excellent pose to release tight hamstrings and also to connect the mind with the body. As you practise the pose keep your breath flowing evenly. In this pose the floor supports the spine while the stretch is emphasised in the back of the lifted leg. Don't force the experience. Place a belt around the ball of the foot. Lift the leg to the first point of resistance and breathe into the sensation. As you exhale, feel within whether to stay where you are or to go deeper. The knee of the lifted leg can be slightly bent. More advanced practitioners can straighten both legs (one along the floor, and one in the air) and take hold of the foot with either one or two hands. To deepen the experience in the hamstring muscles, gently press the lifted leg hip toward the floor. Keep your chest open and your shoulders broad. Breathe smoothly and evenly, offering the inhalation into the exhalation,

and the exhalation into the inhalation. Feel your breath-energy pervade the whole body especially the areas receiving the most sensation. Maintain the pose for at least 8 breaths. An alternative breathing technique is to pause briefly following the inhale and the exhale. Repeat for the same length of time on the other side.

Photo #2 shows a wonderful hip-opening pose called Threading the Needle. This will release any tight areas in the hip and buttock region and allow for more ease of movement in your forward bends. With your spine fully supported by the floor, your knees bent with feet on the floor, bring your right knee towards the chest, place your interlaced hands on the knee and draw it in. Take a few breaths here. Then open your right knee towards the right, bring your shin in front of your chest and lay your outer right ankle against the left thigh. This will resemble a crossed-leg sitting position. Press the lower back to the floor and drawing your left knee up towards your chest, slip your right hand through the space between the right thigh and calf muscle. Reach through to either the back of the left knee or to the kneecap. Reach the left hand around the outside (of the left leg) and join the right hand wherever it is. To deepen the pose, draw your left knee further towards the chest. Feel the right knee opening to the side as the shin is guided in towards the chest. Let your breath keep you intimately connected to your body and its feedback. Make sure the right foot is not rotated (keep the sole of the foot facing towards the left). This pose can also be practised with the left foot resting

on a wall. More advanced practitioners can slowly guide the hips towards the floor to deepen the hip-opening aspect of the pose. Maintain the pose for at least 8 deep slow breaths before changing sides.

In both of these poses make sure the back of your neck is long (use a folded blanket under your head if needed). Long and slow breathing is ideal. Encourage the breath- energy to penetrate deeply into all the spaces known and unknown within you.

Patience and persistence are important qualities to embody as you endeavor to expand your present level of flexibility. Remember that transformation is a directional process. Avoid slipping into negative self-talk. Focus on one breath at a time. Fully immerse yourself in the here and now and allow the future to take care of itself.

PROGRESSION INTO UTTANASANA

Photo # 3: Begin by standing upright with feet about hip-width apart. Take three smooth breaths and feel where you are in present time. Place your hands on the rim of the pelvis with the thumbs on the upper buttocks and the fingers in front. Spread out your toes and feel your feet merge with the earth. If you tend to collapse the arches of the feet, I recommend that you press the ball of the feet down as you lift the toes up. This will engage the arches to lift. Then spread the toes and release them back to the floor. From this sound base draw the inner legs upward towards the pelvic floor. Feel the pelvic floor broaden as the sitting bones open a bit apart.

Photo 5



Photo 6



Photo 7



Photo 8



If you have tight hamstrings slightly bend your knees now.

Photo #4: Take a slow deep inhaling breath. Imagine that the breath is rising up from the earth through your feet, up the legs, and all the way into the pelvis. Let your hands gently lift up the pelvis feeling weight taken off the hip joints. As you exhale, use the thumbs to lift and press the pelvic rim forward. Keep your shoulders down and your heart open. Visualise how the pelvis is rotating freely over the heads of the femur bones. Remember that the pelvis rotating forward will accentuate the entire spine moving in one continuous line forward and then down. If the sensation at the back of the legs is too intense, then bend your knees more. This will also allow the pelvis to more effectively move in the desired direction.

Photo #5: At this point, for beginners, I advise you to bend the knees and place your forearms on the thighs while releasing the spine towards the floor. Remember that the neck is part of the spine so allow the weight of your head to lengthen the neck. Breathe here and tune in to the feeling in the spine. You might want to place a hand at the sacrum to get a reference to its position. Is it moving with the rest of the spinal column? Now slide the hand to the lumbar spine. Is it lengthening? Sense how the sitting bones are lifting up and spreading apart. Feel the deep fold in the hip sockets as the pelvis rotates forward. Fully release the back of the neck, breathe, and enjoy this gravity-assisted supported spinal stretch.

Photo #6: To assist in opening and lengthening the spine, you may want to try this variation. Depending on your flexibility you can practise this with legs bent or straight. Remember if you are going to be keeping legs straight do not press back on the knees, instead lift them up by engaging the quadriceps muscles at the front of the thighs. Follow the instructions for *photo #3* (press balls of feet down and lift toes) to learn how to safely do this. If you are flexible enough to keep the legs straight in Uttanasana there is an added benefit in engaging the quadriceps.

There is a bio-mechanism called reciprocal inhibition that has to do with the fact that our muscles work in pairs. As the quadriceps tighten (as in lifting kneecaps), the opposing muscles, in this case the hamstrings, will be

encouraged to lengthen. We can use this anatomical understanding to assist us in many of the asanas.

In this step bring your hands to your shins with the fingers facing down towards the feet. With a slow inhale, press the hands into the shins and lift up your chest, straightening the arms. Avoid compressing the cervical (neck) spine. Do your best to keep the chest open and the shoulders broad. Feel the sitting bones press back behind you while you lengthen forward through the crown of your head. Feel the space in the front of your torso, the pubic bone moving back with the sitting bones, and the chest moving forward. Feel free either to stay here and breathe, or on an exhale to release the torso towards the legs. Repeat this phase a few times. Enjoy the experience.

Photo #7: After practising the above, move directly into this next variation. Bring your right hand to the left inner elbow and the left hand to the right inner elbow. With either legs bent or straight, let go deeply into the forward fold. Balance the weight evenly across the soles of the feet and fully release the spine to gravity's downward pull. Experience the spine like a waterfall spilling over to the earth. Take a few breaths here allowing the exhaling breath to lengthen you effortlessly. From here you can take hold of your calves, ankles, or feet to maintain the spinal length with the support of your arms.

Photo #8: To deepen the pose, bend your knees so that your belly rests on the thighs. Bring your hands to the back of the ankles and wrap the forearms behind the calves. Keep the back of the neck elongated with the crown of the head facing the floor. Take a steady breath in; as you exhale begin pressing the feet downward, and slowly begin straightening the legs. Stop before the thighs and belly separate. Breathe in and on an exhalation slowly straighten the legs a bit more. Let your awareness infuse the area feeling the most sensation, which for most people will be the back of the legs. Focalise your breath in the hamstrings muscles and their tendons behind the knees. Fill the area with your breath-energy as you inhale. As you exhale, feel the restrictions dissolve. Move deeper when the intensity diminishes. Spend a few breaths exploring the sensations as your legs and spine elongate.

Photo #9: This photo shows Nila deeply folded into Uttanasana. Notice the length in the back of her legs, the rotated pelvis, and the torso united with the legs. If you are at this level in your own practice, make sure that you are not collapsing your weight onto the heels of the feet. Bring some weight towards the ball of the feet. Lift the shoulder blades up your back and broaden the shoulder girdle. If your legs are straight, engage the quadriceps muscles at the front thighs to lift the kneecaps. Feel the hamstrings at the back thighs lengthen and the spine deeply elongate all the way through the top of the head. Experiment with breathing in a circular loop. Inhale up the back of the legs, feeling the sitting bones lift up and spread apart, exhale from the tailbone all the way down the spine to the head through the arms and back to the feet. Continue for at least 8 breaths.

Photo #10 and #11: These 2 photos show a wonderful variation that will open up the upper body and free the shoulder joints. *Photo #10* shows with knees bent and *#11* with legs straight. Practise the variation that is right for your body. You can either come into this version from the above pose or start from standing upright. From standing, interlace your hands behind the back, and lengthen the tailbone towards the heels. Inhale and draw the hands back straightening arms, lift the heart center upwards before exhaling forward and down into the pose. Take a few breaths, slowly extending your edge on each exhalation.

ADVICE FOR THE MORE FLEXIBLE

Earlier in this article I discussed the importance of the pelvic rotation. For inflexible students this is a primary concern. If you are very flexible you will need to be very mindful of not overdoing this rotation. Too much forward pelvic movement can compress and strain the lumbar spine especially as you enter and exit the pose. I have observed many flexible students with chronically sore lumbar spines. To remedy this situation, some retraining may be needed. It's also true that backbends, if not done safely, can overly compress the lower back (please see my Bhujangasana article, issue one of Australian Yoga Life for tips on safe backbend practice).

All levels of practitioners need to be mindful of how they move into and out of Uttanasana. For students who have restrictions, I recommended bending the knees to accentuate the pelvic

rotation. Flexible students need to keep this same rotation in check. As you inhale and lengthen upwards in preparation to folding forward, draw the sides of the waist backwards. As you begin your movement forward continue lifting up through the sides of the waist. The tendency may be for you to dip into the lumbar spine causing hyper-lordosis (swayback). This may give a certain satisfaction as it looks impressive, but long-term is unhealthy as it can create habitually contracted lumbar spine muscles. Another way of explaining this action is to draw the contents of the belly back towards the spine as you move into and out of the pose.

There are different arm positions to explore to enter and exit the pose: *Photo #12:* hands in prayer position at the heart. This would be best for beginners or for anyone with lower back problems. *Photo #13:* arms out to the sides. This variation requires upper back strength. *Photo #14:* arms reaching out alongside the ears. This is more advanced as it requires abdominal as well as lower back strength. Please be aware of drawing the belly back towards the spine as you move into and out of Uttanasana.

CONCLUSION

Uttanasana is an integral element to all the different variations of the Sun Salutation sequence. I encourage you not to rush through and bypass the powerful benefits of this pose. I recommend varying your practice. If you always tend to move quickly from pose to pose, experiment with slowing down, taking each pose on its own. If you always move very slowly and methodically, once you know the proper mechanics and breathing, try a more flowing approach, connecting pose to pose in a seamless dance. Don't let your practice be mechanical. Remember that the aim of our discipline is to lead us to inner freedom.

Uttanasana is an excellent asana to increase awareness of our mental state. This is one of the main benefits that is often overlooked. Where is the mind dwelling at this moment? If we observe our thoughts impartially, we may notice that we very often swing from thinking about some past experience to projecting ourselves into the future. This way of being is frequently accompanied by regret, guilt, fear, and worry.

Uttanasana can be an excellent vehicle for assisting us to live in the moment. Focusing on specific alignment and body mechanics can go a long way in introducing us to the present. In

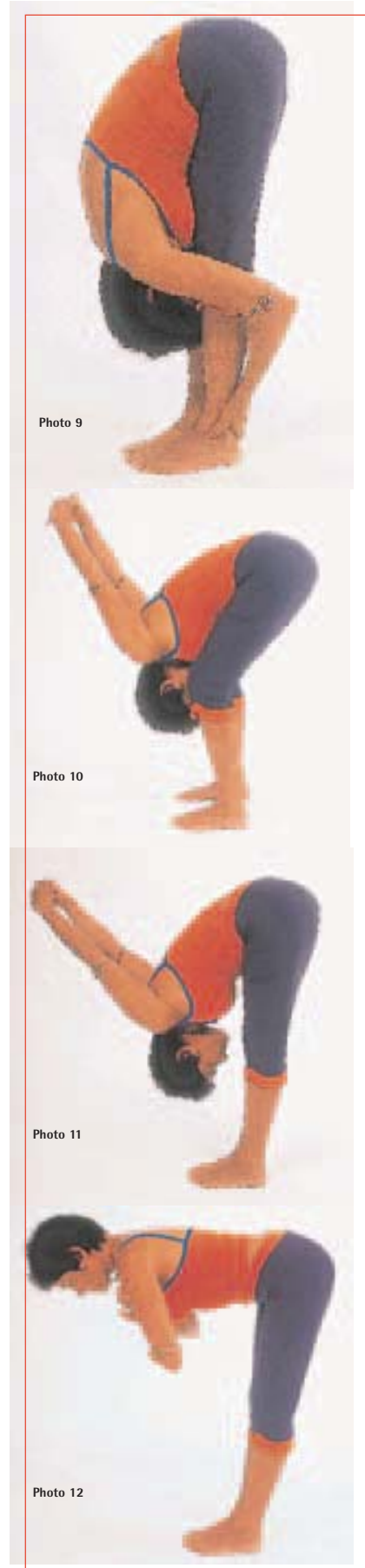


Photo 9

Photo 10

Photo 11

Photo 12

Photo 13



Photo 14



my exploration of the various practices of yoga, I have found the breath to be the primary key to open me to a deep inner experience. Like a solid door that's locked, we can push and struggle to get through, or we can simply insert the key and gain access. As the door to our mind opens using the breath-key we will be able to witness where our thoughts are dwelling. Don't be disheartened if you observe the past/future ping-ponging of your mind. Remember that awareness precipitates transformation. Simply observe without judging yourself.

Many years ago I was being taught a meditation technique that was said to slow down the mind. As I went deep into the practice I began to notice all the insidious little thoughts and mental vacillations that occupied my mental field. This was a bit of a shock. I approached the meditation teacher to confess my failure. To my surprise she congratulated me for my growing subtle awareness. We all need to remember that transformation is usually a step-by-step process. Try to increase your awareness without attaching to all the ups and downs of the mind. Continually open to going deeper, peeling back layer by layer, into stillness, and eventually into bliss.

Using the breath as an inner key to knowing where you are right now is only the first phase of its effectiveness. By attuning your attention to the incoming and outgoing breath you are brought to reside effortlessly in the present time. This is where we want to be! We can gain a certain amount of joy from recalling a past happy experience or from contemplating a positive future, but true bliss and happiness, peace and contentment can only fully exist in the here and now. Through the combination of asana, breath, and a meditative mind, we are led into a state I call the Yoga Zone. In the beginning of practice it may feel like a hard bicycle ride up a steep mountain. As you place yourself into your pose, and breathe slow and deep with full awareness, a shift occurs. The gross superficial levels fall away, effort subsides, and you are left in the Presence of your Self. Turn your gaze within, the view is beautiful! Let go, and swan dive into the Yoga Zone.

Adam Bornstein and his partner Nila are the directors of Radiant Light Yoga. They offer classes, workshops, retreats and teacher training on the Sunshine Coast of Queensland. They can be reached at (07) 5472 7538 or jaima@a1.com.au

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